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Half-Remembrance of Things Past: Critics and Cuts of Old

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1.1 Memories can be treacherous. You may think that you are on firm ground only to discover that you are on quick sands. The memory, on which you relied on for clarity of recall, can let you down. When, therefore, I was asked to write something about my experience of the BSA, I asked to see minutes of the Executive Committee for the mid -70s and early 80s, with which I was involved in various capacities. These proved to be helpful but tantalisingly cryptic. What a busy lot we were and for the most part all unpaid labour. There was an honorarium here and there for particularly onerous tasks, but in hard times even some of these were discontinued.

1.2 And hard times did come upon us. In early 1977, during a Labour administration, the BSA had set up a working party to examine the effects of education cuts on sociology and recommended to the forthcoming Annual General Meeting the following: 'This Association, recognising that the actual and proposed cuts in education affects the discipline of sociology, endorses the recent action of the Executive in setting up a Working Party on education cuts in education budgets and in seeking a meeting with the Minister of State for Education. We instruct the Working party to continue the collection and analysis of data and the formulation of policies to promote the interests of sociology'. (Minute 373 – 25-2-77). The proposed meeting with the Minister proved difficult to obtain and I do not think it ever took place.

1.3 It should be remembered, of course, that sociology as a subject in the university sector had grown remarkably since the early 1960s. In 1961 there were 7 departments of sociology; by 1974 there were 34 (Halsey 2004: 126). All of this growth had occurred in the wake of the Robbins Report (1963) and the establishments of new universities in the UK. But now the economic climate was changing and the advent of the Thatcher Conservative administration in 1979 heralded an ideological change that was certainly hostile to sociology as a discipline. The political talk was of cuts in public expenditure and some universities were seen as candidates for closing – very different from the late 1980s when a sharp U-turn was executed and Polytechnics by political fiat were re-labelled universities.

1.4 Many sociologists, certainly of my generation, will be familiar with Malcolm Bradbury's novel *The History Man*. Its anti-hero was a sociologist working in a new university, who was amoral, deceitful and exploitative, skilled in deploying a left wing vocabulary to achieve his devious ends. The novel became a television series. I was told of a Vice-Chancellor who adjourned a committee meeting to go and watch the latest instalment. True or not it catches the structure of feeling at the time about the subject and its standing, later to be amusingly portrayed by Maureen Lipman in an advert for BT, when she tells her grandson who has only passed sociology in his exams: 'well at least it's an "ology"'.

1.5 But Bradbury also wrote a later satirical novel set in the mid 1980s, simply entitled *Cuts*. Its opening pages set the scene. 'It was the summer of 1986, and everywhere there were cuts…… "cut" was the most common noun, "cut" was the most regular verb……They were reducing public expenditure, bringing down interest rates, eliminating over-production and unnecessary jobs….They were chopping at the schools, hewing away at the universities, scissoring at the health service, sculpting the hospitals, shutting down operating theatres….'

1.6 Surveying the present scene there is a depressing familiarity with all of this. But taken together these two novels do provide indications of the temper of the times. This was the context in which the BSA was working and it offers a way of interpreting the words and actions of the Association at that time. These two things - the attack on sociology as a discipline, which was part cultural, part political, and the regime of cuts, especially in the public sector - were interwoven.

1.7 In 1977, Julius Gould, then Professor of Sociology at Nottingham University and a member of the BSA, published a working party report (1977) from the Institute of Social Conflict: *The Attack on Higher Education: Marxist and Radical Penetration.* The BSA Minutes of a September 1977 meeting record that there was considerable discussion on what kind of action, if any, should be taken. 'It was finally agreed by

thirteen votes to one that Professor Gould be invited to meet the Professional Ethics Committee and explain why he named individuals in the Report. A statement from the Executive committee will be sent to all the major dailies and weeklies expressing regret at the wide publicity given to such a document in which persons are named in such a way as renders it liable to mis-use, especially if it is interpreted as casting doubt on their academic probity, and indicating that Professor Gould has been invited to meet the Professional Ethics Committee' (of the BSA).

1.8 Gould chose not to meet the Professional Ethics Committee. Instead he resigned from the BSA. Halsey surmises that 'he refused to appear before what he doubtless thought was a kangaroo court of Comrades' (Halsey, 2004: 123). I don't know if he did think that but when I look at the members of the Executive at that time - which included Philip Abrams, Keith Kelsall, David Marsland, Margaret Stacey, Kenneth Thompson, John Wakeford , and Janet Wolff - they make a strange bunch of Comrades. It is very difficult indeed to imagine such people being party to a kangaroo court. Halsey describes the Report as a 'scholarly but denunciatory analysis' (Halsey, 2004: 122). Scholarly is not the first word that sprang to my mind at the time and nor does it now. There was a curious conflation of 'Marxist' and 'radical'. Thus, John Rex, a leading figure in race relations research and explicit neo-Weberian, was among those named and attacked. Since he was more used to defending himself against Marxists in the race relations field this at least must have been a novel experience for him.

1.9 The general argument was, as Jennifer Platt summarised it, that 'the positions held were intellectually in error, and that their holders were operating as a network to take over and undermine institutions. Sociologists were not its only targets but they were prominent among them.' (Platt 2003: 118) This was a conspiracy theory writ large. While statements from some Marxists could be found which were silly rather than dangerous and would no doubt have prompted Marx to shout from his grave that he was not a Marxist, the absurdity of the charges reflected a moral panic on the part of the authors. The document was promoted in the name of liberal values and pluralism. It certainly received a good measure of press coverage and gave rise to charges and counter charges of McCarthyism.

1.10 Gould and his colleagues followed up their initiative with the formation of the Social Affairs Unit, a parallel body to the Institute of Economic Affairs. An account of its formation and rationale was given by two of its founder members (both sociologists) in the BSA's newsletter *Network* (a manifestly pluralist publication). There, Digby Anderson and David Marsland told us that in health, education, social welfare, industrial regulation and sectors of society, collectivism and statism have won. The intention of the Unit was to re-examine this and to analyse and challenge the 'collectivist hegemony' in sociology. The reading lists, course handouts, conference programmes and the selection of articles for sociology journals would come under scrutiny. Commenting on the setting up of the Social Affairs Unit the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on 19 December 1980 wrote:

> '….the decision to establish the Unit reveals an almost paranoid obsession with an alleged left-wing threat to academic integrity which in turn gives the less well-informed and extremely inaccurate picture of the ideological balance within the social sciences. Very few academic social scientists are root and branch Marxists (which in a free society like ours they are fully entitled to be)…'

1.11 Even before the Gould Report there had been hostile comments about sociology rather in the way that media studies is routinely referred to these days. Philip Abrams commented on this in 1975 drawing attention to the internal contradictions of the criticisms in the pages of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*:

> 'Being rude about sociology seems to be enjoying a renewed vogue among uninformed people in positions of authority. During the last month I have noticed that the vice-chancellor of a university, the director of a polytechnic, the master of a well known college and a distinguished professor of psychology have all felt called upon to expose themselves publicly in this way. Not that the burden of criticism is new. Sociology is seen as combining mysticism with uselessness, with an annoying ability despite its uselessness and mystification to make people radical.' (*THES* 8-8-75)

1.12 Being rude about sociology is one thing but being the subject of Government hostility (along with other social sciences) is another. This is what happened with the advent of the Thatcher administration in 1979 within the more general context of cutting public expenditure. The BSA Executive set up what it unambiguously called a Working Party Fighting Education Cuts, convened by Diana Leonard, and by the middle of the year was already developing a collaborative relationship with the Social Administration Association. Among other things this resulted in a meeting with Adrian Webb of the Social Administration Association, who reported that junior ministers in the government were calling for an investigation into the funding of research projects and that Michael Posner, the Chairman of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was taking no action to counter these moves. He also drew attention to the setting up of a working party by the Advisory Board for Research Councils, in August 1979. Aware of the pressure on public funding of research across natural and social sciences, the BSA prepared a statement to it. Neither the Sociology nor the Social Administration Committees of the SSRC had known about this.

1.13 The BSA Executive was certainly proactive. It contacted a number of professional associations (Economic History, Political Studies, Research in Higher Education, Social Anthropology and Social Administration) and wrote a joint letter to Michael Posner, at the SSRC expressing concerns about future funding for the social sciences. Moreover, in March 1980, Philip Abrams, John Wakeford and I met with the Minister of State for Education, Rhodes Boyson to discuss issues concerning teaching, research and postgraduate training in sociology. Boyson, an ex- London Headmaster, met us with tea and biscuits and robust courtesy.

1.14 A month later, April 1980 I gave my BSA Presidential Address at the University of Lancaster – 'Space for Sociology' (Eldridge 1981). Re-reading it, I see that I criticised the decision of the LSE to dismiss a Lecturer in Sociology in 1969 for his role in the student unrest. This case and the BSA's position in it has been discussed since by Jennifer Platt (Platt 2003: 109-112). I also referred briefly to the Gould Report referring to it as a 'shabby episode' – a view which I still hold. However, what proved to be most contentious were my comments on the SSRC, some of whose senior officials were present at the time. I could claim to be reasonably familiar with the SSRC and its organisation at the time having served for a number of years on the Management and Industrial Relations Committee, including a period as Vice-Chairperson and also Acting Chairperson. I commented that my assessment was of an organisation that had lost its way –'wracked with internal problems, with a demoralized staff and feeling external pressures from successive governments to justify itself. I have considerable sympathy for those who work for the SSRC but I think their position and that of academics has not been helped by indifferent leadership in recent years'. (Eldridge 1981: 97)

1.15 Not surprisingly Michael Posner, as Chairman of the SSRC was unhappy with this assessment and wrote to tell me so, telling me that I had not behaved like a gentleman. The BSA Executive, however, minuted their support for what I had said. I had referenced the cut backs that had occurred in post graduate funding in the social sciences, including the clawing back of grants that had already been awarded, which had been widely regarded as an act of bad faith. However, the wider concern was how the SSRC stood in relation to the government of the day. I pointed out that the Council was established to provide a mode of support for social science research at 'arms length' from the government of the day and argued that this arrangement was now turning into a bear hug and that this was turning an autonomous institution for facilitating research into a dependent body: 'Hence research applications may be routinely screened by government departments without the applicant necessarily knowing this…..Instead of resisting these pressures publicly and openly the tendency has been to make a series of compromises in order to show the acceptable face of research to government. In my view the stance and style of this approach is misguided since in the end the autonomous institution simply gets engulfed in the matrix of civil service and government. The space for independent research with all the critical and creative possibilities that this implies becomes reduced.' (Eldridge 1981: 97-8)

1.16 Michael Posner was an economist, who was certainly familiar with the organisation of government departments, including the Treasury in the UK and more generally Europe. I have no doubt that he saw the SSRC and consequently the social sciences as under threat and was determined to do all he could to save the institution. If that were not so the next part of my account would be difficult to explain. Following our exchange of letters he invited me to have dinner at his London club (a nice touch that) to discuss the issues I had raised and consider the way forward. It was an amicable encounter in which we discussed the possibility of setting up an umbrella organisation of social science associations whose purpose would be one of advocacy and lobbying. This would fill a gap, which the SSRC could not cover, but which he was prepared to support. The BSA executive backed this – after all we already had an embryonic grouping in place – and further meetings with SSRC senior officials took place to clarify the functions of such an organisation and how it would relate to the SSRC. This led to the setting up the Association of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. (ALSISS). The SSRC was able and willing to provide some funding to help the Association develop its initial activities so the relationship was seen as complementary rather than competitive. The BSA's role was very pro-active and I was invited, once we assembled, to be the first Chairperson of this new Association.

1.17 ALSISS attracted support from a very wide range of social science professional groupings. Our early meetings took place in the Royal Geographical Society, a splendid building next to the Albert Hall, which contained many artefacts relating to the journeys of nineteenth century explorers. To look at the frail kayaks and canoes that some of them had used was enough to stiffen the spirits for our much more mundane tasks. My memory is that we worked well and constructively together and in a friendly spirit.

1.18 What ALSISS succeeded in doing was to give a more public profile to the activities and work of social scientists. It sought to improve and develop channels of communication both between the various learned societies and with the various publics who we wanted to engage with – politicians, the civil service, educators, the University Grants Committee and, of course, the SSRC. This involved us in the establishment of public lectures and conferences to which prominent social scientists made contributions, the production of Social Science Report and the development of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Science and Social Policy. This group met regularly at Westminster to hear presentations from social scientists on contemporary research work and its relevance for social policy. I recall too, that in 1986 the Association met to hear Dr Roberta Miller report on the work she had accomplished as Director of the Consortium of Social Sciences in the USA. This was a stimulus to seek further funding for carrying out comparable lobbying activity in the UK. So it was that ALSSIS laid the foundations for the development of what is now the Academy of Social Sciences, formed in 1999, and which is currently running a strong and well organised campaign for the social sciences. The BSA has maintained a strong presence within the Academy.

1.19 All of this was in place before the Thatcher administration decided to set up an inquiry to look at the activities of the SSRC. This was generally interpreted as a hostile act by the Conservative government and there were indeed fears that the SSRC itself might be abolished. These fears were not unfounded. Leaked correspondence between the Minister of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph, and the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, revealed that Joseph was looking for the report to justify closing down the SSRC. Joseph appointed Lord Rothschild in December 1981 to undertake the inquiry. Rothschild was a distinguished biologist and a Fellow of the Royal Society, who in earlier times had served as head of the Central Policy Review Staff. Rothschild, however, did not give him what he was looking for. While he had some hard things to say about the language of social scientists – particularly sociology – he concluded that the

dismemberment or liquidation of the SSRC would be an act of intellectual vandalism and would be damaging to the future welfare of the country. (Rothschild 1982)

1.20 Posner played the game as an 'insider' and felt, as did others, that he played a bad hand as well as he could. He mobilised support within government itself and from a range of institutions, including the natural sciences, both at home and abroad. He was also a friend of Rothschild's, which did his cause no harm. In an interesting comment on the episode twenty years later Posner wrote: 'In hindsight, it is clear that this confrontation was less significant than the larger struggle which ultimately favoured Joseph and the Thatcher government. Brushing aside the statist and Keynesian basis of the post-1945 consensus while they were in power, Joseph and the Thatcher government succeeded in establishing their cherished conservative Common Ground.' (Posner 2002, para. 77) Joseph, who after all as a Fellow of All Souls' College did have some academic pretensions, felt obliged to accept the findings of the Rothschild Report which had concluded that funding had already been cut to the bone. He had to be content with a symbolic victory by insisting that the Social Science Research Council be renamed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The pretensions to scientific status were thus cut down not for well argued epistemological reasons but by political fiat and perhaps personal pique. Joseph I suppose may have thought differently. Posner recalled that in the course of a pedestrian squabble about budget cuts Joseph asked him: 'Tell me, Mr. Posner, do you think the social sciences observe the Popperian paradigm?' (Posner 2002, para 25).

1.21 Rothschild managed to complete his report in a three month period and it is fascinating to recall that it triggered a discussion in the House of Lords in which a number of academics took part. Lord Beloff (Professor Max Beloff), who had a record of hostility to the SSRC, called the report a 'remarkable document' and welcomed it. At the same time in one speech he managed to criticise Lord Young (Michael Young) the first chairman of the SSRC for being too democratic and not elitist enough in his support for social sciences; the SSRC's Industrial Relations Unit for research which he claimed was biased in favour of trade unions; its Race Relations Unit for its explanations of ethnic conflict; and Professor Tessa Blackstone (later Baroness Blackstone) for lack of scholarly impartiality in educational research. The charge against the Industrial Relations Unit led to the setting up of an independent inquiry on Rothschild's recommendation. Posner noted that the Unit was cleared of the charge but that 'it brought about undeserved suffering and career disruption'. (Posner 2002, para. 74)

1.22 It is noticeable how sociology came in for casual kicks. Lord Annan, who had served on the Heyworth Committee, which recommended that the SSRC be set up (which it was in 1965), described a conversation he had with the then President of the British Academy, about the possibility of the Academy being responsible for grant allocations in the social sciences. What would happen, asked Annan, if there was an application from a sociologist: 'Perfectly all right. We'll bring in the barbarians'. But Annan gave bruises to some other social scientists who, he complained, are sometimes guilty of over-selling their subject and a few of them are crude and arrogant.

1.23 Still, Lord Annan wanted to be even-handed. Not all sociologists are left-wing, he noted – Bryan Wilson of All Souls Oxford is cited (and indeed recognised as a fit companion and adviser to Warden Sparrow!) – and there are some excellent practitioners of the subject – Mr (now Lord) Runciman of Trinity Cambridge came to mind and was specially commended for writing illuminating books on sociology whilst serving as managing director of his family's shipping business. But, more than that, Annan argued that sociology had been a struggling subject in the UK, despite its achievements in France and Germany, which had transformed historical research, as a result of academic politics. For that reason the SSRC had been right to support its development.

1.24 Lord Young, who as Michael Young was a sociologist with experience of community studies and the first chairman of the SSRC, replied in a vigorous way to Lord Beloff. He pointed out what strong support the SSRC had received from the Advisory Board for Research Councils, the CBI and the TUC. He defended the case for allocating research and training funds across a wide spectrum of outlets, especially in the time of growth which the post-Robbins period represented. And he pointed out that this went on alongside the creation of specialised research units. The Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies was an instance of this, whose work had been commended by Mr. Justice Gibson of the Law Commission. For him the value of the SSRC was the setting up of an institution which made possible research activity that kept excessive governmental and commercial control of research and publications at bay. For him it represented an important middle ground between academic interests and public policy makers.

1.25 For anyone even with a passing interest in the social sciences this was a remarkable occasion. In addition to those mentioned there were contributions also from well known luminaries such as Lord Robbins, Lord Swann, Lord Vaizey and Lord Harris (who had helped set up the Institute for Economic Affairs). Never in the Houses of Parliament had the social sciences, their nature and funding, received such a public airing. We sociologists clearly lived in times of conflict as far as our subject was concerned. But we lived to tell the tale. However, the troubles besetting higher education at the present time are sufficient to encourage the BSA to sustain its proactive role. This, as far as I can see, it is doing with great flair and imagination.

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